

New KGB chief sets off alarm bells among Soviets

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MOSCOW — The name didn't ring many bells when Vitaly Fedorchuk was designated the new chief of the KGB, the Soviet secret police. But when people found out where he was coming from, a lot of internal alarms went off.

"There are difficult periods ahead," a Moscow intellectual predicted with a grimace. "Whenever a new KGB chief comes in, he has to act tough to prove himself. But this man's background makes me think that he'll be even tougher than that."

For the last 12 years, Fedorchuk has been the top KGB official in the Ukraine. Under his direction, the KGB unit there has come to be regarded as the most ruthless in the Soviet Union.

"They have a terrifying reputation," another Moscow resident said. "The Ukraine is the second largest republic in our country, and there has been a lot of political instability there, so the KGB has to be as tough as steel."

FEDORCHUK COMES TO Moscow at a time when the Kremlin is committed to a sweeping crackdown on official corruption and crime. Just how energetically he will conduct this drive was something many Muscovites were wondering about last week. A lot of them expect the worst.

"The atmosphere is right for a hard crackdown," one resident of the city maintained. "Soon we'll know whether the man is right, too."

The beefy Fedorchuk, 64, who wears his hair combed straight back in the austere style affected by so many Communist Party functionaries, was named to his new job last Wednesday by the Executive Committee of the Supreme Soviet, the country's rubber stamp parliament.

Since the former KGB head, Yuri Andropov, had been made a party secretary

just days before, the announcement of a new chief was widely expected.

BUT THE CHOICE of Fedorchuk, a little-known figure on the periphery of Soviet power, came as a surprise to many Kremlin watchers who expected the job to go to a bright, young politician, not to a wily old career cop.

The fact that Fedorchuk is a Kremlin neophyte, and a non-Russian one at that, reinforces the feeling here he will wade into his job with both fists swinging.

"His position must be very tenuous," a Western diplomat said. "There's a power struggle going on in the leadership now. How long he lasts may depend upon two things: How closely he associates himself with the people who eventually emerge on top, and how much he comes across as a guy who can keep the lid on while the political situation is in flux."

EVEN THE MOST skilled Western observers know very little about the man who now oversees a vast empire of spies, security agents and prison camps.

One Muscovite who claims to have encountered him in the Ukraine reported that he is a heavy drinker, but this would not make him unique in a country where many top officials have a fondness for vodka. Leonid Brezhnev himself was known as a robust imber until his health failed several years ago and doctors told him to give up both drinking and smoking.

Where Fedorchuk was born is still a mystery, but he seems to have grown up in the area around Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine. He worked at a local newspaper there in his mid-teens.

He served in the army, and in 1939, when he was barely out of his teens, he signed on with the secret police, for whom he has worked ever since.

NOTHING MORE is known about him before 1970, when he took over the KGB in the Ukraine, but Kremlinologists believe it would be highly unlikely for a man who hasn't done some spy duty at a

Soviet embassy abroad to move into the position Fedorchuk now occupies.

As KGB chief in the Ukraine, Fedorchuk was instrumental in brutally repressing the resurgence of Ukrainian nationalism and culture that led to the downfall of the Communist Party boss there in the early 1970s, Pyotr Shelest.

Whatever Fedorchuk's relationship with Shelest, he survived the party boss's disgrace and succeeded in winning the favor of Vladimir Shcherbitsky, the current party boss, who appointed him to the Ukrainian Politburo in 1976.

Later, as the Polish crisis developed just across the Ukrainian border, Fedorchuk was charged with keeping the numerous Ukrainian Poles in line, and insulating non-Poles from the so-called "Polish disease."

HE PRESIDED OVER a crackdown on corruption in that part of the Ukraine which was wrested away from Poland at the end of the last war, driving many local officials from office.

Andropov's assignment to the secretariat, the nerve center of the party and the traditional launching pad for future top Communists here, made many Western observers conclude that he has become one of the most powerful Kremlin figures and a prime contender to succeed Brezhnev later on. If Fedorchuk is Andropov's loyal dependent, the position of the former KGB chief would be remarkably strong.

"IN THE SHORT term, the secretariat will have intensified oversight over the KGB," another Western envoy said, "and Andropov is the most logical man in the Secretariat to exercise this control."

Other observers suggest that the appointment of career cop Fedorchuk means the leadership has decided to take the top KGB job out of politics to minimize the organization's role in the power struggle that has been going on here for the last three months.